Allan Bloom and America
The Closing of the American Mind
Allan Bloom
New York: Simon and Schuster
392 pp., $7.95 (paper)
Reviewed by Thomas G. West

Allan Bloom introduced me to the study of political philosophy in three fine courses at Cornell in the mid-1960s. For that I will always be grateful. Political philosophy has been decisive for my life, just as it is for Bloom's. Yet I am about to criticize Bloom's book. I do not wish to be ungrateful. I offer my criticism in the spirit of Bloom's teacher and mine, Leo Strauss, and in the spirit of those classical political philosophers whose writings Bloom and Strauss have pointed us to throughout their careers. I mean to practice what Bloom preached.

The Closing of the American Mind is a diagnosis of the intellectual ills of our day, and, if it is not a prescription, it contains at least some suggestions for a cure. The book is most sound, I will argue, in its description of current pathologies. It is partly sound, partly unsound in its account of their origin. It is least sound in its prescription for their healing.

Bloom begins by examining the students in our prestige universities, and he finds them deficient in moral formation, in their reading of serious books, in musical tastes, and above all in ethics. They have no love in their souls, no longing for anything high or great. Their minds are empty, their characters weak, and their bodies sated with rock and roll and easy sex. These students come equipped with a simple-minded relativism that is quick to close off all discussion with the tap, "Who's to say what's right and wrong?" Their relativism justifies an easygoing openness to everything, an openness which exposes their incapacity for being serious about anything. Their proclaimed openness, in fact, turns out to be a dogmatic closedness toward moral virtue no less than toward real thoughtfulness. They are "spiritually detemencous."

Toward the end of the book Bloom turns to his teachers, who are even worse than the students. They carry on the routine of education out of habit and as a job. When it came to the crunch during the so-called student unrest of the 1960s, they collapsed, because they believed in no principles that would justify resistance to barbarians. And so the left-wing thugs took over Cornell without opposition.

The cause of our current malaise, in Bloom's diagnosis, is modern philosophy, which has infected us in two ways—through politics and through 19th and 20th century continental European thought. As for politics, America was founded on modern principles of liberty and equality which we got from Hobbes and Locke. Liberty turned out to mean freedom from all self-restraint, and equality turned out to mean the destruction of all differences of rank and even of nature. Our Founders may have sinned, or have pretended to act, "with a firm reliance on divine providence" (Declaration of Independence), but their natural-rights philosophy came from the atheists Hobbes and Locke. (Bloom forgets, and the Founders were self-conscious atheists or merely the dupes of clever and lying philosophers.) Bloom characterizes the Lockean

Old Thinking
for New Suckers
Petrostrokia: New Thinking for Our Country and the World
Mikhail Gorbatchev
New York: Harper & Row
225 pp., $19.95
Reviewed by Harry V. Jaffa

This offering by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. reminds me of a New Yorker cartoon of some years back. Company big shots are sitting around the conference table, in the middle of which is a large box. On the box is emblazoned the word "NEW." A neophyte among these present asks, "But what's new about it?" To which he receives the reply, "The NEW is what's new about it."

As far as I can see, Gorbatchev's new thinking and Gary Hart's new ideas stand about on the same level. The former involved stamping a NEW label on some old Marxist-Leninist garbage, and the suckers are lining up to buy it—"with the President of the United States at the head of the queue." It is page after page of the absurd, wild-eyed—and most God-awfully repetitious—rhetoric, and resembles nothing so much as the text of one of those seven-hour speeches that the Soviet leadership gives to the Supreme Soviet, or to Party Congresses when they convene. I think I'd rather be tortured by the KGB in the basement of the Lubianka, than have to sit through one. If you live in that environment, you learn to sleep through the bulk of such speeches—with your eyes open, however—and to applaud on cue. But you also learn to become wide awake on a sudden when, by one or two words buried in the meaningless mumbo-jumbo are given forth before changes in policy or personnel among the top brass.

In a recent newspaper article entitled "Useful Idiots: Then and Now," I reviewed the steady rhythm of the process of over sixty years—beginning with Lenin's New Economic Plan—whereby the U.S.S.R. recovers the economic strength lost to the ravages of communism by periods of detente (for peaceful coexistence, or whatever it is called in its latest reincarnation). When the sun shines, as in America's case, the West removes its overcoat—that is to say, it disarms itself, while keeping the money and exporting the technology that prepares the U.S.S.R. for its next round of aggression.

Here are some paragraphs—they might be taken almost at random—from Petrostrokia:

Some politicians and media, particularly in the United States, have been trying to present perestroika as a driver for "liberalization" caused by Western pressure. Of course, one cannot help paying tribute to Western propaganda officials who have skillfully played a symbolic game of democracy. But we still believe in the democratic nature of Western societies when their workers and office-employees start electing the owners of factories and plants, bank presidents, etc. when their media put corporations, banks, and their bosses under a barrage of regular criticism and start discussing the real processes inherent in Western countries, rather than engage in an endless and vacuous argument with politicians. (pp. 127-8)
Bloom (continued from page 15)
definition of the Founders in this way:
[in the state of nature man] is in his own. God
naturally looks after him nor punishes him.
Nature's indifference to justice is a terrible be-
rovement for man... [This state of nature doc-
trine] produced, among other wonders, the
United States. (p. 163)
The practical result:
God was slowly executed here; it took two
hundred years, but local theologians tell us He
is now dead. (p. 230)
Similarly, the Founders may have thought they
were establishing a political order based on reason—
Bloom stresses our initial claim to being the first
political order so grounded—but the regime of rea-
son turned out to be the regime where reason discov-
ers the virtue of unleashing the passions. At first
reason legitimates only the modest passions of in-
dustriousness and money-making. But having aban-
donned its older claim to be the rightful master of
the soul, reason eventually lost its authority and became
impotent against demands for self-indulgence and
mindless self-expression. The story of America, ac-
cording to Bloom, is a tale of the practical working
out of the degradation inherent in the logic of our
founder principles:
This is a regime founded by philosophers and
their students... Our story is the majestic and
triumphant march of the principles of freedom
and equality, giving meaning to all that we have
done or are doing. There are almost no
accidents; everything that happens among us is a
continuation or one of both of our principles....
[T]he problem of nature is always present but
always repressed in the reconstruction of man
demanded by freedom and equality. (p. 97)
Eventually, Bloom says, the infections occasioned
by our political principles sapped the strength of reli-
gious faith and traditional morality. The relativism
of today's students, is then, in Bloom's view, a per-
fected expression of the real soul of liberty, which from
the start, in Hobbes's thought, meant that life had
no intrinsic meaning. The anti-nature dogmas of
women's liberation, which deny the obvious natural
differences between men and women in the name of
equality, are destroying the last remnants of the fam-
ily, which had been the core of society throughout most
of America's history. Likewise, the anti-nature dog-
mas of affirmative action—instantiating that equal op-
portunity be suppressed until all categories of
Americans come out exactly the same—deny the
obvious natural differences among human beings in
regard to ambition and intelligence.
Thus equality and liberty eventually produced
self-satisfied relativism which sees no need to aspire
to anything beyond itself—"spiritual detumes-
cence." They also produced left-wing, radical
movements which try to implement the "reconstruc-
tion of man demanded by freedom and equality" and
which not only threaten but dominate important
parts of our leading universities. Further, Hobbe-
sian-Lockean liberty was also designed to liberate
scientific technology in order to conquer nature and
make life comfortable. The very idea of a conquest of
nature implies disrespect for natural limits and
has contributed to the decline of respect for nature's
guidance in all areas of contemporary life.
The second cause of our problems today, Bloom
says, is post-Lockean modern philosophy. The big
names are Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, but
their views have been popularized (and degraded)
by such men as Marx, Freud, and Max Weber. Their
ideas have worked their way into our universities
and our speech, giving us "The Self," "Creativity,"
"Culture," and "Values" (four of Bloom's chapter
titles). These continental writers, more radical than
Hobbes and Locke, all strongly denounced "bour-
goise society," i.e., democracy-American-style. From
them we have learned to think of ourselves as desig-
cably low. Yet at the same time, we have vulgarized
the grand conceptions especially of Rousseau and
Nietzsche and fitted them into our own democratic
desires. Thus every nursery-school child is en-
couraged to be "creative."
If I may elaborate on Bloom's analysis and fol-
low out my own medical analogy, America's found-
ing principles, taken from Hobbes and Locke, may
be compared to the AIDS virus. The body into which
AIDS insinuates itself may continue to appear
healthy for many years before the symptoms reveal
themselves. Thus, although our founding principles
were atheistic and relativistic at bottom, the body
politic continued to look healthy for about 180 years
because the disease was carefully concealed to manifest itself openly.
The AIDS virus renders the body helpless before
the attack of infectious diseases. It destroys the
body's ability to distinguish good from evil viruses
and opens it up to the penetration of evil. AIDS is the
body's relativism, the self-destructive openness of
the body's mind. Similarly, an AIDS-infected Ameri-
can mind loses its ability to tell the difference be-
 tween healthful and harmful opinions. Satirical cus-
toms and traditions, such as moral self-restraint and
the habits and attitudes necessary for sustaining
family life, for seriousness of purpose, and ulti-
 mately for national survival, become indistinguish-
able from life-destroying doctrines and beliefs, such
as the hostile teachings of 19th and 20th century
German philosophy. The American mind, suffering
from Hobbes-Locke induced AIDS—a liberty that
has no respect for nature and natural limits—there-
fore not only fails to resist the destructive infection
of Nietzsche-Heidegger, but with its false openness
the American mind mindlessly welcomes the infection,
thus bringing on what may be the terminal stage of
the disease.1
Bloom also prescribes a cure for our malady.
There is a Great Books education in the prestige
universities, taught in the spirit of opening students' minds
to the charms and challenge of "the philo-
sophic experience." Of course Bloom is not so naive
as to think that reading a few good old books will
transform American political and intellectual life. He
means that this sort of reading might help in
restoring some sort of seriousness to education and
therefore to life. Bloom readily acknowledges that
this is a slender hope: * * *
I myself cannot subscribe to Bloom's diagnosis of
the problems of American education, although I do
subscribe to the general features of his account of modern relativism and its dangers.
I can sum up my main objection in this way: Far
from being the source of the problem, or an impor-
tant source of it, America's founding principles are
for us probably the only basis for its solution; far
from being the equivalent of mental AIDS, our
principles are our immune system. Bloom is of
course right when he says that Hobbes's notion of
l liberty cannot distinguish itself from license. He is
right that there can be no principled objection, on
the basis of Hobbes's doctrine, to a government-spon-
sored effort to make men and women the same.
Indeed, as is well known, there is in Hobbes's thought
no principled objection to tyranny altogether, tyr-
anny being nothing more than monarchy mislabeled,
and monarchy being the form of government recom-
mented by Leviathan. But the American Founders
were not Hobbesians, however often Bloom and his
students and friends may repeat the falsehood that they were.
The Founders had a low opinion of Hobbes. James
Wilson, one of the two or three most impor-
tant men at the Constitutional Convention of 1787,
once summed up his assessment of Hobbes by as-
serting that Hobbes's "narrow and hideous" theories
are "totally repugnant to all human sentiment, and
all human experience." Wilson says this in the con-
text of affirming Lockeian ideas about the natural
rights of man. Similarly, Alexander Hamilton, in
"The Farmer Refuted," attributed Hobbes's prin-
ciples to the Tory Samuel Seabury.
His [Hobbes's] opinion was, exactly, coinci-
dent with yours [Seabury's], relative to man in
a state of nature. He held, as you do, that he [man]
was then perfectly free from the restraint of law
and government. Moral obligation, according to him,
is derived from the introduction of civil soci-
ety; and there is no virtue, but what is purely
artificial, the mere contrivance of politicians, for
the maintenance of social intercourse. But the
reason he ran into this absurd and impious doc-
trine was that he disbelieved the existence of an
intelligent superintending principle, who is the
governor and will be the final judge of the uni-
verse.
...to grant that there is a supreme intelli-
genius who rules the world and has established
laws to regulate the actions of his creatures; and
still, to assert that man, in a state of nature, may
be considered as perfectly free from all restrains
of law and government, appear to a common
understanding, altogether irreconcilable.
Good and wise men, in all ages, have en-
braced a very dissimilar theory. They have sup-
pored that the freedom from the relations are stand
in, to himself and to each other, has constituted
an eternal and immutable law, which is, indis-
ensibly, obligatory upon all mankind, prior to any
human institution whatever.
This is what is called, the law of nature....
Upon this law, depend the natural rights of
mankind... (Emphasis added.)
The key point is that Hamilton, as did the other
Founders, integrated Lockeian language into a moral
framework they had inherited from classical and
medieval political philosophy and from their many
Protestantism. Nature and nature's God were the
ultimate source of duty and right.
Against Hamilton, Bloom speaks, without the
slightest attempt to prove it, that for Americans
rights precede duties as a matter of course. He

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implies that Hamilton is wrong about the state of nature,
that the laws of nature have no moral content, and that there is in America an abandonment from the start of any idea of duty or purpose in life beyond personal whim or commitment.

But in modern political regimes (such as America), where rights precede duties, freedom definitely has privacy over community, family, and even nature (p. 113).

Bloom also says the Enlightenment views of Hobbes
and Locke were meant to liberate men "from God's tutelage" (p. 165). That Bloom attributes to America, and America's Founders, a view that Hamilton went out of his way to denounce as typical of the immoral Tory position, "because of our better understanding of their founding when he said, "In American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because they're God's creature." (All men are created equal.)" That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, on the assumption of his common subjection to the commonwealth. The Founders were far from indulging the Kantian delusion that a well-constructed constitution would work even for a nation of devils. This delusion is, to be sure, typical of these post-Rousseauian continental thinkers who abandoned human nature as the standard of political life. Hamilton once explicitly decried it when he said, "It is always very dangerous to look to the vices of men for good."

The Founders were well aware of the need for public-spirited citizens. They anticipated with clarity the consequence of a loss of public virtue. They believed that a people accustomed to living however it pleased, who saw no higher purpose than, say, entertainment and having fun—a people incapable of self-government in the sense of controlling selfish passions and interests—and would also be incapable of self-government in the sense of democracy, making public laws for themselves to live by. As Madison says in The Federalist, -- "Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities [men's capacity for virtue] in a higher degree than any other form."

But if a people ever becomes slavishly lacking in self-restraint, if their "spirit shall ever be so far debased," they "will be prepared to tolerate anything but liberty."

The students described by Bloom in the first part of his book are indeed approaching the debased character which Madison feared. But it is not true that our Founders' principles and institutions sowed what we are now reaping. It can be shown, as I have done in The Foundations of Education, that they in fact did everything they could to form the character of the people to make them self-assertive, self-controlled citizens. For the moment I will merely mention John Adams' educational provisions in the Massachusetts Constitution, the surprisingly strict laws regulating the public morals passed in those years by state legislatures, and the intention of the American Constitution to rectify "an almost universal prostration of morals" caused by irresponsible actions of the several state governments which had "undermined the foundations of property and credit."

I could go on quoting the Founders—an exercise that might be useful for readers of Bloom's book, since he rarely if ever quotes Americans on America, but limits himself to the pronouncements of foreigners such as Hobbes, Locke, and Tocqueville. (I almost included Soul Bellow.) Instead, I will mention the one fact that is the most convincing piece of evidence to me about the source of America's current difficulties. If you look at the history of those changes in American education of which Bloom so justly complains, you find that those changes were always introduced by men who knew they were at odds with the people and the politicians who were formed by the Founders' principles. Those intellectuals who have been promoting for many decades the relativistic, anti-national, and leftist dogmas prevailing today all batted the principles of the founding, and most of them said so openly and loudly. Their work could go forward only after the Founders' view of natural right and natural law had been discredited. The first sustained attack on the founding principles was launched in the South before the Civil War by slaveholders and their apologists who wanted to get rid of natural rights so they could be free to continue to enslave their slaves. During the progressivism era there was a sustained demystification of the founding, especially of the Constitution, and Woodrow Wilson among others attacked the Founders' views and institutions because, as they saw it, they were the object of individual rights, they stood in the way of massive state control of private life. More recently we have been subjected to constant vitriol on religion and morality in American life—Bloom mentions that nothing is less controversial in the prestige universities than such attacks—and these attacks have consistently included attacks on the idea of natural law and natural right.

But Bloom argues that the last attacks on America in the 1960s were really a product of America itself, the unintended culmination of a deformed enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment enlightenment 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that there was nothing for him in the concerns of his high school classrooms (p. 244), nor in the piety of his orthodox grandfather (p. 60). But when he arrived at the University of Chicago, he says, and saw its pseudo-Greek towers, "[he] somehow sensed that [he] had discovered [his] life" (p. 243). He implies that he knew he had discovered it before he ever met his master Leo Strauss and I can believe it. Bloom is describing himself as an uprooted intellectual for whom traditional religion and "bourgeois society" mean nothing. For such a man, what incentive is there to study America with any sympathy? Far from being the land of the free and the home of the brave, the American Republic was for him a dreary desert from which he longed to escape. His oasis was the university, the Republic of Letters, and there he has stayed ever since. Of course he is very interested in America as it comes to sight through the students he teaches and the university that gives him his home. But everything outside the university, Bloom implies, is philistine, bourgeois, and contemptibly vulgar. Consider the snobbishness of this typical remark of his: "The importance of the universities to an American cannot be overstated. They are civilization's only chance to get to the Classics" is civilization only to be found in or through universities? Considering Bloom's own attempt to indict, one wonders whether civilization is to be found at all in the "best" universities (the only exception being an isolated, often embellished, teacher here or there). Why does Bloom not look to certain less prominent but more substantial colleges, where the trends he describes have sometimes been resisted more successfully than at the better-known institutions? Or, to put it more radically, why should we respect the modern university at all? If Bloom is right in his intellectual development, as I am inclined to believe, it seems much more likely that, if civilization is to be preserved, it will be in small, private universities, not because of them.

Tocqueville, an authority on America whom Bloom admires, would never have suggested that universities are the access to civilization (even in 1835, when they were so much sounder than today). Indeed, Tocqueville and Bloom differ profoundly in other ways as well. To exaggerate for clarity's sake: Tocqueville never stops celebrating the virtues of small-town life in America, with its strong Proteanism, its tight moralism, its close-knit families, and its human-scale democracy, while Bloom seems to value all this only as the source of strong prejudices: the liberation from which will be all the more satisfying as Bloom middifies it. Otherwise Bloom seems ready to chime in with the Rousseauan-Nietzschean condemnation of bourgeois life.

In this respect, without intending it, he is in agreement with, for example, the recent opponents of Judge Robert Bork, who (unlike Bloom) want to replace the America of equal opportunity and moral self-restraint with a society of forced egalitarianism.

In such a society, liberty will be abolished in favor of a false conception of equality (it is already in the course of being abolished), and the kind of education which Bloom praises will disappear.

This leads to Bloom's prescription for a cure to our ills. It centers on the university. Bloom is firmly against the idea that the university should serve society. In this he opposes the Founders, particularly Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. Jefferson's conception of university education was public-spirited. The main intent is "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend." This is to be done by studies in "the principles and structure of government." "Political economy" is to be learned in order to promote public industry. Students are also to be enlightened with "mathematical and physical sciences, which advance the arts, and administer to the health, the subsistence, and comforts of human life." Finally, the university is to "develop their reasoning faculties" and "enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instil into them the precepts of virtue and order." All of this is in order "to form them to habits of reflection and correct actions, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.

Bloom's university, on the other hand, is to be explicitly devoted to cultivating the philosophic life, by pointing students away from their own countries and traditions. But in the current climate, which is already all too willing to question the virtue of American society and government, would this orientation not tend to ossify the prevailing prejudices? Nietzsche, one of Bloom's immensely patrician heroes, the shallow malaise, righty points out the debilitating effect of the Great Books education in our world (a passage I first read with Bloom at Cornell in 1965): such an education, says Nietzsche, promotes "a kind of knowledge about education, a complex of various thoughts and feelings about it, from which no decision about its direction can come." In healthier times, education is the best writings of the past is not for the sake of objective consideration, but "always has a reference to the end of life, and is under its absolute rules and directions" ("Grundriss der Vorlese und Vorleichtung of History for Life, sec. 4). Bloom would agree, but he makes the end of life "philosophy," forgetting, it seems, the lesson of the philosophers that all human beings everywhere have a social and political orientation. Without that, a Bloomian education will produce no Socrates but pale shadow-like shadows of Socrates-intellectuals.

Bloom is not indifferent to the needs of society. His final paragraph suggests that a return to the classics may also have a decisive effect on the shape of the world. "But Bloom would make the public mission of the university anti-social, anti-revolutionary, any benefit to society being an accidental by-product, while Jefferson and I would make it public mission primarily political, allowing "the philosophsic experience" to be cultivated without official sanction.

Is not Jefferson's university closer to what Nietzsche, Plato, and indeed anyone of common sense, would consider appropriate for the future leaders of society, not to say all philosophers? His university would certainly accommodate the chance philosopher in one niche or other of the curriculum. But does it really make sense to attempt to go beyond this, to institutionalize an education to the philosophic life in a conventional academic structure? In the end it is who happens to be teaching and who happens to be learning that will make all the difference. Philosophers, like Caesars, can appear anywhere, and they can take care of themselves. The attempt to plan for them seems to me to betray a tendency on Bloom's part to equate, against the letter of his intention, the philosopher and the intellectual. Finally, is it really philistine to structure the university with a view to service to society, above all in attempting to educate future statesmen in the principles of republican government, but on a lesser scale training men and women to be useful to their society and to themselves? That is something that can be understood and done well by those who are far from the exalted heights of

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Constitution, and he thereby designates their enemy, Abraham Lincoln. This major error follows from Bolick's Hayekian "negative concept" of freedom—that freedom consists in the lack of compulsion.

In Bolick's view, the civil rights movement, including the 1954 school desegregation case of Brown v. Board of Education, strove to establish a color-blind society. But, Bolick to the contrary, Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in Brown did not decisively overturn the 1896 decision of Plessy v. Ferguson affirming the constitutionality of segregation. For Warren's

Bolick argues that the civil rights revolution of the 1960s succeeded in establishing legally the ideals of equal opportunity demanded by America's founding documents and natural rights political philosophers such as John Locke and Thomas Paine, who inspired the Founders. America's history—not just black history—is the unfolding of the ideal of individual freedom for all Americans. Bolick succinctly describes freedom's friends and enemies. But he errs in praising the abolitionists, who were no friends of the

located by race (such as the Jollie case, which Bolick subsequently overpraises, and Jackson v. Transportation Agency in 1987). Bolick correctly blames an acceptance of collectivism, the replacement of equality of opportunity with equality of result, and an increase in black race consciousness for the trend toward racial preference policies, but he exaggerates the shift in legal principle from the days of segregation.

Unfortunately, Bolick maintains, these legal advances have not yet produced concomitant economic or social benefits. In the second part of his book he blames recent education, welfare, and racial preferences for the current black condition. He challenges civil rights leaders to consider an array of reforms, many of which are advocated by scholars such as Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams. Bolick would reconcile the civil rights movement by making economic liberty a principal tenet. He then adds a new diatribe against affirmative action, including education vouchers, enterprise zones, and abolition of licensing and minimum wage laws. His perspective would reestablish civil rights as individual natural rights.

One would think that such a sensible program could gain support from all segments of the population. Yet Bolick apparently places greater faith in an activist judiciary, which would strike down all unconstitutional the barriers to black progress in laws restricting economic activity. Here his libertarianism (visible earlier as well as in his strictures against "victimless crimes," such as drug usage) makes conservatives part company from him. Like his fellow libertarians who hold to a negative concept of freedom and share with Karl Marx the notion that political power can be abolished, Bolick claims that "the judiciary is the only branch of government capable of safeguarding individual rights."